

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHAM ISLAM AND CHAM BANI COMMUNITIES IN VIETNAM

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Abstract: This article analyzes the complex relationship between two distinct Cham Muslim communities in Vietnam: Cham Islam and Cham Bani. The aim of the study is to clarify the process of Islamization, the unique characteristics of each community, forms of conflict, and to propose solutions for harmonious coexistence. The findings reveal the unique syncretism of the Cham Bani, where traditional beliefs and matrilineal customs blend with Islam, in contrast to the strict adherence to Islamic law observed by the Cham Islam. These differences have led to historical tensions and current conflicts over doctrine, religious practices, and the construction of places of worship. This article contributes to a deeper understanding of religious diversity within the Cham community and provides a foundation for proposing solutions that promote mutual understanding and sustainable coexistence.

Keywords: Bani, Cham, Islam, religious conflict, Social coexistence

1 Introduction

Islam, with its long history and widespread global influence, was introduced to Vietnam very early during the 10th century and has since become an important part of the country's diverse religious landscape. Notably, the majority of Muslims in Vietnam are Cham people—an ethnic group with a rich culture and a long history closely associated with the ancient kingdom of Champa in central Vietnam (Lafont, 2011; Danh, 2022). Within the Cham community, Islam does not exist in a single unified form but has diversified into various groups, the most prominent of which are the Cham Muslims (often referred to as Cham Islam or Cham Asulam) and the Cham Bani (or Cham Awal).

The parallel existence of these two groups not only reflect the diversity of religious life among the Cham people but also illustrate the complex processes of exchange, adaptation, and localization of Islam within a unique cultural environment. The Cham people today, descendants of the ancient Champa inhabitants, have historically embraced several major world religions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam. These religions, while bringing with them the cultures of their

origins, were selectively integrated by the Cham based on elements compatible with their pre-existing and deeply rooted indigenous beliefs (Anh, 2014; Bien & Dop, 1991). The process of localization has played a dominant role in the reception of these religions among the Cham Balamon and Cham Bani communities, whereas the Cham Muslim (Islamic) community has undergone a more intensified religious transformation.

However, alongside the similarities, differences in doctrine, rituals, and religious practices have led to certain social and religious tensions between the two groups, including historical conflicts and latent tensions in contemporary life. The issue of "old Islam" (Bani) and "new Islam" (Islam) remains a sensitive topic in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan provinces. This has, to some extent, sparked serious disagreements between Cham Bani and Cham Islam followers living in the same villages (Anh, 2013). Such realities have disrupted communal life, culture, and society, leading to conflicts within families, clans, and neighborhoods.

This article aims to provide a deeper analysis of the complex relationship between the Cham Muslim (Is-

lam) and Cham Bani communities in Vietnam. Specifically, the study will clarify the historical process of Islam's introduction into Vietnam and present the distinct characteristics of each community in terms of faith, doctrine, religious organization, and practices. Furthermore, the paper will explore the types of religious and social conflicts that have arisen between the two groups, and propose solutions to promote harmonious coexistence and contribute to the sustainable development of the Cham Muslim communities in the future.

2 The Introduction of Islam into Vietnam

Islam was introduced to Champa at a very early stage, partly due to Champa's strategic geographic location along the bustling maritime trade routes connecting China, the Malay Archipelago, the Middle East, and India (Anthony, 2000; Majumdar, 1963; Aymonier, 1891). This process can be divided into several phases:

Early Phase (10th–14th centuries): Initial contact with Islam came from the Middle East and North Africa. There is evidence that Islam reached Champa during this period, primarily through trade activities. Records in the *Song Shi* (History of the Song Dynasty) recount a ritual involving buffalo sacrifice in Champa, during which the phrase "Allahu Akbar" was invoked (Maspero, 1928). The royal chronicles of Panduranga also mention *Po Awluah* (the Islamic deity Allah) as one of the legendary kings of the Cham people (Aymonier, 1890). Additionally, two Arabic-inscribed steles, dated around 1025–1039, were unearthed in central Vietnam, indicating the presence of a foreign Muslim community in Champa (Ravaisse, 1922). However, scholars argue that this was merely a phase of cultural and religious contact and trade exchange, rather than widespread acceptance or deep assimilation of Islam among the local population, as Hinduism still held dominant influence at the time.

The Formation of the Cham Bani Community (15th–17th centuries): Strong Influence from the Malay World and Localization

From the 15th century onwards, Hinduism began to decline in the Malay-Indonesian archipelago, while Islam began to spread rapidly across the region. Malacca became a major center for the dissemination of Islam in Southeast Asia starting in 1458 (Mon,

2012). Champa had long maintained strong relations with the Malay states in areas such as trade, politics, culture, and defense. These connections created favorable conditions for the transmission of Islam from the Malay world into Champa.

Many historical and literary sources confirm this Islamic influx. For instance, King Po Kabrah (15th century) is said to have visited Malayu, and Princess Po Sah Inâ reportedly married a Malay Muslim (Po Dharma, 1999). By the late 16th century, some Cham people had adopted Islamic culture from the Malays, leading to the emergence of a community that identified themselves as Bani in the Panduranga region (Manguin, 1979).

However, the Cham Bani (Awal) community as it exists today only truly took shape following the religious reconciliation policy of King Po Romé (1627–1651). Cham texts from this period frequently reference Islam. Several significant events were recorded, such as King Po Romé's visit to Kelantan, his marriage to a Malay princess, and his study of Islam. He skillfully applied the Cham cultural principle of "dualistic synthesis" (*lưõng hợp*) to reconcile tensions between the older and newer religious traditions (Anh, 2015, 2018).

King Po Romé required Muslim followers to maintain their traditional beliefs alongside Islamic doctrines. At the same time, adherents of the older (Hindu) religion were instructed to also worship deities of the new faith—referred to in Cham as *Yang Baruw* ("new gods"). This policy created a syncretic religious system that blended Islamic and Hindu elements in a way that diverged entirely from orthodox interpretations of both religions globally.

As a result, those who worshipped Allah prior to Po Romé's reign came to be known as *Cham Awal* (Bani), while those who adopted Islam after his reforms were referred to as *Cham Ahiér* (Hawkins, 2004). These two groups—Awal and Ahiér—became spiritually interdependent counterparts, embodying the Cham philosophy of religious dualism.

The Reintroduction of Orthodox Islam (Second Half of the 20th Century)

After the 17th century, due to continuous warfare, the Kingdom of Champa faced the risk of complete collapse. Many Cham people migrated to Cambodia to seek refuge. There, through frequent contact with Muslim communities from across the Islamic world—particularly from Malaysia and Indonesia—they grad-

ually lost their traditional religious identity and mostly converted to orthodox Islam.

By the mid-18th century, a portion of the Cham who had settled in Cambodia returned to live in An Giang province, Vietnam and later moved into other south-eastern provinces of Vietnam. This group formed what is now known as the Cham Islam community of southern Vietnam (Han, 2013).

In the 1960s, orthodox Islam was reintroduced to the Cham regions of central Vietnam after nearly 200 years of separation. Cham intellectuals from Saigon, after coming into contact with orthodox Islam, began re-proselytizing in the Cham areas of Ninh Thuận. As a result, a portion of the Cham Awal converted to Cham Islam, leading to intermingled religious practices within several Awal villages in Ninh Thuận today.

This development has given rise to three distinct religious and spiritual Cham communities that exist today: Cham Ahiér, Cham Awal (Bani), and Cham Islam.

3 Characteristics of the Muslim (Cham Islam) Community in Vietnam

The Cham Islam community in Vietnam numbers approximately 30,000 people, primarily residing in the provinces of An Giang, Ho Chi Minh City, Tay Ninh, Dong Nai, Ninh Thuan, and Binh Thuan (Open Development Vietnam, 2023). In Ninh Thuan specifically, the Cham Islam branch emerged in the 1960s when a group of missionaries from An Giang and Saigon introduced the religion to the region (Dohamide, 1965).

In terms of faith and doctrine, Cham Islam adherents strictly follow the five fundamental pillars of Islam: belief in the one and only God, Allah, and in Muhammad as His messenger; praying five times a day; fasting during the holy month of Ramadan; giving alms (Zakat); and performing the pilgrimage to Mecca at least once in a lifetime, if financially and physically able. The Quran serves as the guiding principle for all actions, encompassing theology, creed, principles of social organization, morality, ethics, and law. All behaviors of Muslims are categorized into five types: *Wajib* (obligatory), *Haram* (forbidden), *Sunnat* (recommended), *Makruh* (discouraged), and *Harus* (permissible without reward or sin) (Han, 2001).

In terms of religious organization and practice, Cham Islam followers worship in official mosques (*Masjid*), where a council of *Hakaim* leads rituals and oversees the religious and financial affairs of

the community. They practice strict monotheism, worshipping only Allah, and have largely abandoned traditional Cham rituals such as ancestor worship and other indigenous religious practices.

Islamic Law and Its Influence on Daily Life

Islamic law (*Sharia*) has a profound influence on the daily lives of Cham Islam adherents. Strict dietary laws (*Halal*) are closely followed—for example, pork is strictly forbidden (*Haram*). Stimulants such as tobacco and certain fermented beverages like alcohol and beer fall under the category of *Makruh* (discouraged and best avoided). Devotees perform prayers five times a day, either at mosques or convenient locations, with the Friday noon prayer (*Jumu'ah*) holding particular spiritual importance. For female believers, praying at the mosque is not obligatory and can be carried out at home.

Although Islamic law restricts artistic activities such as music, singing, and dancing—especially those involving emotionally stimulating or provocative elements due to concerns about mental distraction and neglect of religious duties—Cham Muslims in Ninh Thuận still participate in cultural performances alongside Cham Bani communities during events like Ramâwan, festivals, and traditional New Year celebrations.

Life-Cycle Rituals

Cham Islam followers observe clearly defined life-cycle rituals. The *Cakak mbuk* ceremony (naming and hair-cutting) is performed when a newborn is 7 or 14 days old, during which parents give the child a religious (Islamic) name. The *Khotan* ceremony marks the coming of age at 15 years old and includes circumcision for boys or symbolic genital purification (a slight cut) for girls, representing spiritual cleansing—this is a prerequisite for full participation in religious activities.

Marriage is encouraged in Islam, with the recommended age being 17–18 for males and 16–17 for females. Marriages between cousins are also encouraged in the Cham Islam community, reflecting their patrilineal kinship system.

Funerals strictly follow Islamic customs: the deceased must be buried within 24 hours of death without a coffin, with the head facing north and the face turned westward toward Mecca. Funeral rites are simple—there is no music, no public mourning or

wailing. Unlike other Cham communities, ancestor worship is not ritualized but limited to a few Quran recitations after burial.

Relations and Religious Exchange

Cham Muslims in Vietnam maintain close ties with orthodox Muslim communities in Southeast Asian countries such as Malaysia and Indonesia. They also maintain strong connections with the broader global Islamic community.

4 Characteristics of the Bani Muslim Community in Vietnam (Cham Bani/Awal)

Today's Cham Bani community is a religious group formed primarily through the integration of indigenous beliefs with certain elements of Islam. There are currently about 50,095 Bani adherents in Vietnam, mainly concentrated in the provinces of Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan ([Open Development Vietnam, 2023](#)). Unlike the Cham Islam community, the Cham Bani had no contact with orthodox Islam for several centuries. When orthodox Islam returned to central Vietnam in the mid-20th century, the Bani viewed it as a foreign and difficult-to-accept religion.

In terms of faith and doctrine, the Cham Awal do not regard *Po Awluah* (the Islamic deity Allah) as the one and only supreme god, but rather as a leading supernatural being among many deities. They continue to worship a pantheon of spirits and gods, including earth gods, water gods, fire gods, deified kings, ancestral spirits, and the regional goddess *Po Ina Nagar*.

Bani religious scriptures, known as *Kuraân*, are a compilation of selected verses derived from the Islamic Quran. These texts are written in a modified form of Arabic script, often interspersed with Cham script (*Akhar Thrah*) to provide guidance and explanation. However, Bani clerics (*Awal*) typically memorize these verses without fully understanding their meanings (Durand, 1903, ([Lafont, 2011](#))).

Cham Bani Temples (Sang Magik) and Religious Practices

Cham Bani temples, known as *Sang Magik*, are not fully influenced by the architectural style of international Islamic mosques—they do not feature domes or tall minarets. Unlike orthodox mosques, which are open five times a day for daily prayers, Bani temples

are only open during specific ceremonial occasions such as *Ndik suk*, the month of *Ramâwan*, *Suk yeng*, and *Waha*.

The Bani clergy system (*Po Acar*) is organized into five hierarchical levels, from lowest to highest: *Acar*, *Madin*, *Katip*, *Imâm*, and *Gru*. A Bani follower is officially recognized as having entered the faith after participating in the *Kareh* initiation ceremony, which usually takes place when the followers are between the ages of 12 and 15. Bani adherents are not bound by Islamic *Sharia* and they do not practice the five basic pillars of orthodox Islam. They believe that religious duties are the responsibility of the clergy, who act as intermediaries and fulfill these obligations on behalf of the laity.

The Cham Awal maintain a highly diverse and rich system of rituals and festivals. They perform both Islamic-influenced ceremonies and indigenous folk rituals. The most notable is the *Ramawan* festival, a localized version of the Islamic month of fasting (*Ramadan*).

Life-cycle rituals in the Cham Awal community are a synthesis of folk and Islamic elements, including *Éw Praok*, *Pather pabah*, *Kareh*, *Katan*, *Ndam Lakhah*, *Athaw Bah*, and *Ndam Padhi*. In addition, there are rituals related to agriculture and clan-based ceremonies.

Importantly, the Cham Bani community continues to practice a matrilineal and matrilocal system, which stands in stark contrast to mainstream Islamic customs. The concept of pure bloodline (*harat*) is a key criterion for organizing life-cycle rituals and determining eligibility for important roles within the community.

5 Religious and Social Conflicts Between Cham Islam and Cham Bani

The parallel existence of two branches of Islam within the Cham community in Vietnam—Cham Islam and Cham Bani—has not always been peaceful. Although both groups worship Allah, differences and similarities in doctrine, religious practices, and social perceptions have given rise to various forms of conflict, ranging from underlying tensions to overt confrontations throughout history (see [Table 1](#)).

The reintroduction of orthodox Islam into the Cham regions of Central Vietnam in the 1960s met with fierce resistance from local Cham communities, resulting in significant difficulties—and even bloodshed. Prior to 1975, attempts to spread Islam from An Giang and Ho Chi Minh City to Ninh Thuan encountered strong opposition. Even today, more than half a cen-

Table 1. Comparison of Differences and Similarities Between Cham Islam and Cham Bani

Criteria	Cham Islam	Cham Bani
<i>Object of Worship</i>	Monotheistic—worship of Allah; Muhammad is his messenger	Allah (Po Awluah) is supreme, but polytheistic worship of other deities (e.g., Yang, ancestors, Po Ina Nagar) is maintained
<i>Religious Texts</i>	Original Quran	<i>Kuraân</i> —localized version of the Quran, interwoven with Cham script (<i>Akhar Thrah</i>), often memorized without comprehension
<i>Place of Worship</i>	<i>Masjid</i> (mosque), open five times daily for prayer	<i>Sang Magik</i> (Bani temple), only open during festivals
<i>Five Pillars of Islam</i>	Strictly observed	Partially observed by clergy; rarely practiced by laypeople
<i>Ancestor Worship</i>	Almost entirely abandoned	Actively maintained
<i>Social System</i>	Patriarchal	Matrilineal
<i>Life-Cycle Rituals</i>	Follow orthodox Islamic law	Localized rituals; death viewed as achieving spiritual perfection
<i>Traditional Festivals</i>	Discontinued ancient Cham communal festivals	Maintain some Islamic rites but continue to observe indigenous traditions

tury later, orthodox Islam has gained only a small number of followers in the region, who live in small, scattered clusters within a few Cham Bani villages in Ninh Thuan. At the present, conflicts between the two communities often arise around efforts to expand Islamic proselytization into Bani villages.

One of the most prominent points of conflict relates to funeral rites and burial customs. Cham Muslims believe that the deceased should be buried as soon as possible and do not emphasize whether the death was “perfect” or not. In contrast, the Cham people in general—and the Cham Bani in particular—hold that those who die outside the village have experienced a “bad death.” According to their ancient folk belief, bringing the bodies of those who have died “imperfectly” into the village would bring misfortune to the entire community. When Muslims attempted to bring such bodies into Bani villages, these differing views led to violent clashes in the past, disrupted public order and caused disunity within the ethnic community.

Differences in preserving tradition have become a major source of conflict. The Cham Islam community, under the strict regulations of Islamic law, has completely abandoned traditional Cham communal festivals such as *Kate*, *Cambur*, *Éw Muk Kei*, and *Ngap Yang*, which the Cham Awal and Ahier have preserved for generations. As a result, the Awal and Ahier communities often view Cham Muslims as people who have “abandoned their ancestors, deities, and traditional culture.” While Cham Muslims have renounced ancestor worship, Cham Bani continue to maintain this

practice, skillfully integrate it into rituals of Islamic origin.

The persistence of matrilineal traditions among the Cham Bani also marks a stark contrast with the Cham Islam community. These include customs such as preserving *Ciét Atuw* (sacred heirlooms), agricultural rituals, polytheistic beliefs, and the worship of *Po Inâ Nâgar*, the Cham Mother Goddess.

Another issue involves the difficulty in constructing Islamic places of worship. As Islam expands into other Cham villages, the need to build more mosques arises. However, these efforts often face with strong opposition from the communities adhering to traditional beliefs. In some cases, newly built mosque foundations have even been demolished. Consequently, Muslim followers are sometimes forced to conduct religious activities temporarily within the grounds of a private believer’s home.

In reality, those who convert to the “new religion” often face ridicule, contempt, and social isolation from their own family members, relatives, and friends. They are accused of being materialistic, of chasing immediate benefits while abandoning the ancestors, deities, and cultural traditions of the Cham people. Many converts, unable to withstand criticism, scorn, and even threats of being disowned by their communities, have returned to their former faith.

However, it is undeniable that the Cham Islam community in Ninh Thuan and Binh Thuan has gradually grown over time. One of the key reasons for this is that the Cham Islam community requires individuals from

other groups to officially convert before they are allowed to marry someone from within the community.

Lastly, the Cham Bani have long opposed being labeled as a branch of Islam. They acknowledge having adopted certain Islamic elements, but assert that the core components of the Bani religion are indigenous in nature. Today, they continue to actively campaign for official recognition as a distinct religion by the state.

In conclusion, the relationship between the Cham Islam and Cham Bani communities remains fraught with unresolved tensions. These underlying conflicts pose a serious obstacle to the harmonious and sustainable development of both communities—and of the Cham ethnic group as a whole.

5.1 Solutions for Harmonious Coexistence and Sustainable Development

To build a sustainable Cham Muslim community and promote harmonious coexistence between the branches of Islam, a multi-faceted approach is needed—combining government policy, community effort, and the involvement of civil society organizations.

- Fostering Mutual Understanding and Respect:

First and foremost, it is essential to enhance interfaith and community dialogue forums. These platforms would allow Cham Islam, Cham Bani, and Cham Ahier followers to learn about each other's beliefs, doctrines, and practices, thereby fostering mutual understanding and respect. At the same time, integrating content about the cultural and religious diversity of the Cham people into local education curricula is crucial. This would help the younger generation develop an objective and respectful attitude toward differences from an early age, thereby addressing prejudices and preventing future conflicts at their root.

- Flexible and Fair Religious Policy:

The state should implement more flexible and equitable religious management policies, especially in granting permits for building places of worship and organizing religious activities. Such policies must guarantee freedom of belief for all religious and spiritual groups within the Cham community, without compromising public order or security. Comprehensive development support should link ethnic policies with religious policies, focusing on poverty alleviation, improving education, and stabilizing production to enhance the material well-being of the population. This would help reduce the incentive to convert religions for short-term economic gains, thereby contributing to long-term social stability.

- Preserving and Creatively Promoting Traditional Cultural Identity

To preserve Cham cultural identity, it is necessary to encourage in-depth research on the Cham Bani and other Islamic branches in order to systematize and safeguard the unique cultural values and rituals of each group. It is essential to foster respect for the traditional beliefs and customs of the Cham people—even in cases of religious conversion—in order to avoid unnecessary discrimination and conflict. Preservation efforts must actively involve the local communities, enabling them to feel pride in and responsibility for their cultural heritage.

- Promoting Unity and Reconciliation Within the Community

Strengthening internal unity is a key factor. Cultural and sporting exchanges, as well as joint community events among different religious groups, should be encouraged to create opportunities for interaction, eliminate prejudice, and foster solidarity. The role of social organizations, village elders, community leaders, and other respected individuals should be strengthened so they can participate in resolving conflicts, maintaining social order, and uniting the community. Finally, positive media campaigns that highlight the diversity and richness of Cham culture—and promote the image of a united and harmonious coexistence among its communities—will help build a stable and sustainable living environment.

6 Conclusion

This article has provided an in-depth analysis of the historical introduction, distinct characteristics of the Cham Muslim and Cham Bani communities, and the religious and social conflicts that have emerged between them. The Cham people, descendants of the ancient Champa kingdom, have embraced Islam through multiple phases—from early contact to intense localization that gave rise to the Cham Bani, followed by the return of orthodox Islam. Differences in doctrine, rituals, and social values have led to persistent tensions, disrupting communal life and fueling intra-ethnic conflict.

These conflicts—from historical confrontations to ongoing latent disagreements—pose a significant barrier to the harmonious development of the various Islamic branches and the Cham people as a whole. The Cham Bani community's opposition to being classified as part of orthodox Islam, along with their continued struggle for recognition as an independent re-

ligion, further highlights the profound differences in identity.

Therefore, building a sustainably developing Cham Muslim community requires addressing these conflicts decisively and fostering peaceful coexistence. Achieving this demands a strong commitment to mutual understanding, respect for internal diversity, and collective efforts to transcend differences so that people can work toward a stable and prosperous future for the Cham people in Vietnam.

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